

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a NEW Henry Turnbuckle story by

JACK RITCHIE

*"Well, congratulations, Henry," Ralph said, rubbing his hands. "You've done it again. . ."*

*And congratulations to Henry's creator, Jack Ritchie, who this year won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for writing the best mystery short story of 1981, "The Absence of Emily," which appeared in the January 28, 1981 issue of EQMM. Take a bow, Mr. Ritchie. Take a bow, Henry. We're proud of you. . .*

## THE FIFTH GRAVE

by JACK RITCHIE

When Ralph celebrated his twentieth wedding anniversary he invited me to the party and there I met his brother-in-law, Julius, a civil engineer.

"Well, well," Julius said, "Ralph's been telling me a lot about you, Henry. When you start deducting, the fur flies and nothing is sacred."

I smiled modestly. "I do try my best."

Ralph, Julius, and I were in the kitchen, where Ralph was making drinks for the crowd.

"I think I've got a problem for you to work on, Henry," Julius said. "It's about a missing body."

Naturally I became attentive.

Julius began. "Four years ago I was on a job up in Sheboygan County. We were rebuilding a country road—widening it and putting on a new topping. It was one of those roads that meanders all over the place, so while we were at it we decided to straighten it out as much as we could."

© 1982 by Jack Ritchie.

I nodded understandingly. If there is anything a civil engineer cannot endure it is a meandering road.

"Well, there was the country cemetery—just a little bit of a thing, maybe an acre or less. No buildings. And we needed a chunk off one end of the property for our road. That meant we had to move six graves.

"Getting permission to move graves is a delicate thing and you want to do it as quietly as you can. The last thing you want is a lot of publicity. So our firm's lawyers moved on tiptoe, so to speak, and we got the authorization.

"We moved six graves. But there were only *five* bodies. I mean there wasn't anything at all in the fifth grave—just the tombstone on top. I still remember the name. Lucas Martin. But no coffin, no body, no bones. You could see the spot hadn't even been dug up before."

"Hmm," I said wisely. "Did you note the date of death on the tombstone?"

"November 8, 1913."

November 8, 1913? Somehow that rang a bell in my memory. Where had I heard or seen that date before? "Did you call this matter of the missing body to the attention of the local authorities?"

"Hell, no. We were on a schedule. There's no telling how much time we'd have lost if we had to wait for some kind of an investigation. No, we just kept everything to ourselves and moved the five bodies and six tombstones to another part of the cemetery.

"And there were a couple of strange things about the sixth grave too. For one, the date of death was exactly the same as on the fifth tombstone—November 8, 1913. And for another, we found a body all right—a skeleton actually—but no coffin.

"I mean, after all those years you'd still expect to find enough scraps to show there had been one. But there was nothing. Just the skeleton. And Leslie Randolph—that was the name on the tombstone—must have been a woman, because there was enough left of the shoes she was buried in to tell us they were the high-button kind women wore in those days."

Julius and Ralph now regarded me expectantly.

"Well," I said, "First of all, since these two people evidently died on the same day I deduce that it might have been as a result of some kind of an epidemic. Typhus, perhaps, or diphtheria, both of which were rampant in those days. How old were they when they died?"

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Julius thought a moment. "As I remember, both were about twenty-one or twenty-two."

I mulled the problem over for ten or fifteen seconds. "Or possibly they died in an automobile accident, with both of them in the same or conflicting vehicles. There were auto accidents, you know, even in 1913."

Ralph asked the pertinent question. "But why weren't both of them buried? Why just one?"

"I don't know yet, Ralph," I admitted. "However, I will give the matter thought. There is nothing that the deductive brain cannot unravel provided it is given all the facts. Have you forgotten anything, Julius?"

"No. That's it. The whole ball of wax."

What did I have to work with? Obviously, my starting point must be that date, November 8, 1913, but that would have to wait until tomorrow. I helped Ralph and Julius carry the trays of drinks into the living room.

The next day, after Ralph and I finished our shifts and signed out at headquarters, I went directly to the Journal Building where I got permission to consult the newspaper's back files.

The moment I saw the headlines for November 8, 1913, I had the solution for the entire conundrum. How simple it all was once you knew the facts.

I was so enthused I drove right over to Ralph's house where he was preparing to mow the lawn before supper.

"Ralph," I announced, "I have the solution to the problem of the unoccupied grave. The key to the entire matter is the date—November 8, 1913."

"What about November 8, 1913?"

"Between November seventh and the twelfth, in 1913, the Great Lakes experienced one of the worst storms in their history. Millions of dollars of damage was done and eight lake boats went down with all hands."

Ralph, who was born far inland, attempted to correct me. "Lake ships."

"No, Ralph. Lake *boats*. No matter what the size of a lake vessel, lake sailors traditionally refer to it as a boat." I returned to the main point. "Anyway, among the hundreds of lives lost were those of Leslie Randolph and Lucas Martin. They were either passengers, or possibly crewpersons, aboard one of those ill-fated lake boats."

"Crewperson? Leslie Randolph? In 1913?"

I was bulging with information. "Ralph, in those days the cooks on the lake boats were often women. As a matter of fact, on some of the boats they were husband-and-wife teams. Though not, evidently, in this case."

"What has all this got to do with the empty grave?"

"Ralph, when people are lost at sea—or in this case at lake—and their bodies are never recovered, it is often the custom to erect a tombstone over a blank plot in a cemetery to commemorate the event. And *that* is why there was no body beneath the tombstone of Lucas Martin. His body was never recovered. On the other hand, the body of Leslie Randolph *was* recovered—probably washed ashore—and it was buried under the sixth tombstone."

Ralph nodded to indicate that, so far, he went along with me. "But that still leaves something to explain, Henry. Why wasn't Leslie Randolph buried in a coffin?"

"I can only guess, Ralph. Perhaps Leslie Randolph's relatives decided to scrimp on funeral expenses. Or possibly she belonged to some stark religious sect that eschewed coffins."

But frankly I was not at all satisfied with either of those answers. The question remained, why *had* Leslie Randolph been buried without a coffin?

The subject continued to nag at the back of my mind, and so, three weeks later, when Captain Johnson sent Ralph and me up to Sturgeon Bay to pick up a fugitive I took the opportunity to detour, traveling through quite pleasant farm country liberally sprinkled with dairy herds. We arrived at the cemetery a little after eleven in the morning and parked at the side of the road.

The sun-dappled acre was surrounded on three sides by tall old trees, with the open side abutting the road. Across that road, perhaps a hundred yards back, stood a neat farm with its enclave of barn, silos, and outbuildings.

A large farm hound began barking and loping in our direction. I hesitated about getting out of the car until I saw him come to a halt, ready to defend his property but choosing not to venture across the road.

Ralph and I, with one eye on the hound, left the car and proceeded to stroll through the cemetery, reading tombstones, some of which dated back to the 1830s. Certain family names seemed to predominate—Randolph, Martin, Riley and Armstrong.

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Martin and verified the dates. Yes, November 8, 1913, and both of them had been twenty-two when they died.

I heard the slam of a screen door in the distance and turned to see a woman walking in our direction carrying a shotgun.

She closed the distance between us and I saw that she was perhaps in her middle twenties, with dark hair and violet eyes. She gave the hound the order to stop barking and then both of them crossed the road. At our car, she paused momentarily to stare at the license plate and then halted some fifteen feet from Ralph and me.

I smiled fully. "Do you always greet visitors to this cemetery with a double-barreled shotgun?"

She remained cautious. "That depends. If I don't recognize the car or the people I like to find out what's going on."

"Madam," I said joshingly, "we do not have the slightest intention of stealing bodies or tombstones."

"How about trees?" she asked, keeping the shotgun steady and aimed.

I thought the proper time had come for me to introduce myself. "My name is Detective-Sergeant Henry S. Turnbuckle," I said impressively. "Of the Milwaukee Police Department." I produced my wallet for identification purposes and held it at arm's length.

She came close enough to study my badge, my picture, and my face. She did the same for Ralph and then relaxed somewhat and the dog totally, his tail thumping.

"What in the world are two Milwaukee detectives doing in this part of the country?"

"Just passing through on our way up north on official business," I said. "And at the same time trying to solve a little mystery." I pointed to the headstones of Leslie Randolph and Lucas Martin. "I notice that both of these people seem to have died on the same day."

She looked at the stones. "Oh, yes. They died in the Great Lake Storm of 1913. Both of them were crewmen on one of the lake boats and it went down with all hands."

Ralph gazed at me with what I interpreted as great admiration for my deductive powers.

I chuckled. "And Leslie Randolph was undoubtedly a cook on the vessel?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. He could have been a deck hand."

I blinked. He? "Leslie Randolph was a man?"

"But of course. As a matter of fact, both of them were my great-grandfather's best friends. The three of them had planned on work-

ing on the lake boats together, but then Great-grandfather's father died, so he decided to get married instead and take over the farm. Neither one of their bodies was ever recovered." She introduced herself. "Louise Armstrong. I'm baby-sitting the farm today. Everybody else is at the fair."

I rubbed my chin. Neither body was recovered? Then whose body was under Leslie Randolph's memorial stone? And, more important, why?

But then I had it. "Miss Armstrong," I said, pointing at Randolph's headstone, "would it surprise you to learn that there is a woman's skeleton under that tombstone and that she was the victim of a murder that occurred nearly seventy years ago?"

She studied me doubtfully.

I turned to Ralph. "Where does one hide a tree? In a forest, of course. And where does one hide a body? In a cemetery." I frowned darkly.

"Ralph, I could have deduced all of this in Milwaukee had Julius but given me all the facts."

"What facts didn't he give you?"

"Ralph, if you are surreptitiously burying a body, especially in a semi-public place, you do not dig down the traditional six feet. You are anxious to get the matter over with as quickly as possible and leave the premises. Therefore you dig only as deep as you have to, which is perhaps three or four feet. And Julius failed to mention, or observe, that the grave must have been shallow."

Then I smiled confidently. "The individual who committed the murder *knew* that those tombstones were over empty plots. Now only two things remain to be ferreted out. Who was the victim and who was the murderer?"

I proceeded to think while they watched me respectfully and naturally I arrived at part of the solution in short order.

"Ralph," I said, "if you were going to bury a body in this cemetery and did not want to be observed while in the process, how would you go about it?"

"I'd wait until it got dark."

"But how could you see well enough to dig the grave? Would you bring a lantern? No, the light would gleam in the night like a terrestrial star and draw the curiosity of anyone who glimpsed it."

"All right, so I'd wait until there was moonlight."

"Ralph, I doubt that even moonlight would provide sufficient light for what you had to do."

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"Why not?"

"Because you would want to *very* carefully conceal what you had done. After all, this is a functioning cemetery. People are bound to come here occasionally to pay their respects or to bury others. If the burying was done clumsily and there was evidence of digging it would draw immediate suspicion, especially from those who knew there was supposed to be no body under the tombstone.

"No, Ralph, in order to conceal the fact that one has buried a body one must go to a bit of trouble. First, one must carefully remove the sod and set it aside. Then one must spread out a tarpaulin upon which to deposit the raw earth one excavates. Then when the hole is dug and the body deposited one returns as much of the earth to the grave as one can and replaces the sod. Then one gathers up the soil displaced by the body and decompaction and carries it somewhere else for dispersal. And in order to be this painstaking I would venture to say that only daylight is suitable."

Ralph looked at the road. "Wouldn't that be taking pretty much of a chance, to dig by daylight? People would be bound to drive by and see what you were doing and wonder why. And what about the farm across the road? Anybody living there would certainly notice you."

"True, Ralph. Therefore I deduce that the body was buried early in the morning. *Very* early in the morning. This is dairy-farming country, Ralph, and farmers must remain home mornings to do the milking and adjacent chores before they can think of traveling anywhere. Therefore, our digger could count on the roads being deserted until at least mid-morning. And as for the farm across the road, while farmers rise early for milking—in the height of the summer when the sun rises at nearly four A.M.—they do not rise *that* early. They remain abed until their regular milking time, which is usually around six o'clock, summer, winter, spring, and fall.

"Hence, in that interval of daylight, say between four and six A.M. on a summer's day, when the occupants of the farm across the road were still asleep in their beds, the murderer came here with his body and buried it."

I did not exactly expect applause but a little appreciation would have been appropriate.

"What about the dogs?" Louise asked.

"What dogs?"



"Just about every farmer has a dog or two. And they bark. So even if this burying was done between four and six A.M., the dogs across the road would have barked their fool heads off until—" She stopped and became deeply thoughtful.

I attacked the problem of the dogs. "Ah ha," I said. "I have it. The *only* person who could have buried the body without having the dogs go crazy was actually—" I stopped and cleared my throat. "How long have Armstrongs lived on the farm across the road?"

"We are a Century Farm. Ever since 1842."

I thought about that some more and sighed. "Well, as long as I have gone this far I might as well finish it. As I deduce it, the only person who could have conducted the digging without raising a commotion would have had to be the *owner* of those dogs. And that, I am afraid to say, must have been one of your ancestors. Say your great-grandfather, perhaps?"

Louise said nothing.

I smiled magnanimously. "You may trust me to remain silent on this matter. I was merely indulging in the mental exercise presented by the problem, a veritable cerebral etude." I chuckled good-naturedly. "After all, the murder is nearly seventy years old. History. So let sleeping murderers lie. The victim is dead, and, by now, so is the murderer."

Again Louise said absolutely nothing.

I frowned and then did some quick arithmetic. I was rather astounded. "Do you mean to say that your great-grandfather is still *alive*?"

She nodded reluctantly. "He's ninety-one. And great-grandmother is ninety. They've been married sixty-seven years and they've retired to Florida."

Sixty-seven years? I did some more mental arithmetic and was again astounded. "That would mean he married her in about 1915. However—in the matter of Martin Lucas and Leslie Randolph—you distinctly said that your great-grandfather had planned to go with them on the lake boats, but he got married 'instead' and took over the farm. That would mean he married in 1913 or prior to that. In other words, he was married at least twice. What happened to his first wife?"

"She ran away with a traveling salesman," Louise said firmly.

"Ah ha," I said, wrapping it up, "so your great-grandfather told anyone who inquired. But did anyone ever see or hear from her again? Or from the mythical traveling salesman, for that matter?"

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Louise had a remarkable way with silence.

Ralph rubbed his hands. "Well, congratulations, Henry. You've done it again. You've got your murderer and he's alive."

"Now Ralph, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since—"

"It's your sworn duty to uphold the law," Ralph said solemnly. "You've got to go down there with extradition papers and drag that old man from the side of his wife and bring him back here for justice."

"Ralph, we've got to take into consideration the ages of both—"

"I can see the headlines now, Henry. *Detective Solves Seventy-year-old Murder. Collars Ninety-one-year-old Suspect.* Your picture will be in every newspaper and your name on everyone's lips. You might even get into the *Guinness Book of Records* for arresting the oldest murder suspect in the United States. Maybe the world."

"Ralph," I said, feeling a bit warm, "you don't seem to understand that my deductions, though undoubtedly correct, are all theoretical. In the world of practicality, we could meet with all kinds of stumbling blocks."

"What stumbling blocks, Henry?"

"Well, he might fight extradition, for instance. And then there's the body. Could we *positively* identify it as that of his first wife?"

"Science is marvelous, Henry. Face it, you've got him nailed."

My voice seemed a little higher than usual. "I do *not* have him nailed, Ralph. It is entirely possible that I may be wrong."

Strangely, Ralph seemed to be enjoying the situation. "But, Henry, your deduction about the dog was absolutely brilliant. It proves that Great-grandfather Armstrong was the only man who could have done the burying."

"About that dog," I said a trifle desperately, "we are *assuming* there was a dog. But Armstrong could have been an exception to the rule of dogs and farmsteads. Or, if he had a dog, this dog could have recently died and the burying of the unidentified body could have taken place between the time of the dog's death and the time the newly acquired puppy had learned how to bark. Great-grandfather Armstrong could have slept through the whole thing and any stranger with a body could have sneaked into the cemetery and buried her. Whoever she was."

Ralph was silent for a few moments and then he sighed dramatically. "Well, Henry, do you really and truly think we should forget about the whole thing?"

"I do, I do." I stared into the far distance. "Ralph, there are times

when I think this entire universe is a put-on and I'm the only one who hasn't been told."

Louise's smile had been growing. "Would you like to come up to the house and have a cup of coffee or something?"

"Do you have any sherry?" Ralph asked. "At a time like this, Henry finds that nothing bucks him up like a glass of sherry."

We walked toward the house.

"Trees?" I said.

Louise nodded. "I thought you two might be timber cruisers. They ride about the countryside looking for valuable trees, mainly black walnut. There are about a half dozen in that grove around the cemetery and they're worth more than a thousand dollars each. Sometimes the cruisers make the farmer an offer, but other times they just make a note of the place and sneak back at night or when the farmer isn't home. Sam Riley down the road had two of his black walnuts cut down just a few weeks ago. They were at the other end of his pasture and he didn't hear or see a thing."

Inside the house, Louise found a half empty bottle of sherry and dusted it off with a kitchen towel. She poured me a glass. "Why don't you come back sometime soon and solve the Mystery of the Purloined Black Walnut Trees?"

"I may," I said. I held my glass to the light. *The Guinness Book of Records*? I shook away the temptation and drank my sherry.

## DETECTIVERSE

### WANDERING MINSTREL

by JOHN M. HEBERT

There was a musician named Smoot,  
A thievin', dishonest galoot.  
He walked into a store  
With a weapon, large bore,  
And said, "Okay, gimme the lute!"

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